

High Energy Prices Have Strategic Cost

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By JOE WILSON

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When most Americans see the high price of gasoline, they wonder how they will afford groceries, school supplies or the gas to get to work. While these are real concerns, the high price of fuel is a symptom of a much larger issue that left unaddressed threatens America's military and diplomatic advantage.

The United States spends roughly \$700 billion a year to buy foreign oil. Of the 21 million barrels of oil consumed by Americans every day, nearly 70 percent comes from overseas. These numbers are troubling, and they contribute to high gas prices here at home. However, it is not just how much we purchase overseas but from whom.

Our heavy reliance on foreign oil means billions of dollars go to line the pockets of hostile regimes and indirectly the terrorist organizations they support. In Venezuela, the fourth major oil supplier to the United States, President Hugo Chavez has used his nation's oil reserves and the revenue they create to exert greater influence over the region -- including direct assistance to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or FARC, a terrorist organization that has carried out attacks against an American ally, Colombia. Chavez has even made threats to halt exports of oil to the United States. By relying heavily on Venezuelan oil, we are willfully forfeiting a strategic advantage.

Yet, the implications of our reliance on foreign oil are not simply due to state-owned oil reserves. In May, oil-financed rebels set off explosives along a Royal Dutch Shell pipeline in Nigeria damaging production from that pipeline and adding to already diminished production caused by previous acts of terrorism. Nigeria is a major source of U.S. crude oil imports. During that same month, we imported 851,000 barrels of crude oil per day from Nigeria. This makes us vulnerable to these types of attacks all around the world.

Along with the oil revenues filling the coffers of unfriendly nations, we also see growing financial strain on our own military. Between 1997 and 2007, consumption of fuel by the military grew by 26 percent. At the same time, annual military fuel costs grew an overwhelming 380 percent from \$3 billion to \$11.4 billion. These numbers are disconcerting on their own. The military is diverting a growing portion of its budget to fuel aircraft, ships, humvees and other vehicles. There is less money for salaries, family support projects, armaments and new high-tech innovations to protect the troops. Our reliance on foreign oil weakens our strategic standing and contributes to high fuel prices for those tasked with defending this nation.

All these tendencies demand America reject the status quo and adopt a comprehensive energy strategy to relieve pain at the pump for American families and reduce dependence on foreign oil.

America should be leading the world in the research and development of alternative, renewable energy sources and expanding the current use of nuclear, wind and solar technology. However, new technology will not entirely replace oil and natural gas in the immediate future. After all, energy sources like hydroelectric, geothermal, wind, solar and biomass accounted for only 7 percent of America's total energy needs in 2006.

Meanwhile, the estimated 1.127 trillion barrels of oil and 175.28 trillion cubic feet of natural gas currently off-limits to production in this country are substantial even if only a percentage of those estimates can be found and produced. These resources like the 10.4 billion barrels of estimated oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the 18 billion barrels of estimated oil in the Outer Continental Shelf prohibited from leasing will take time to harvest as well. But it means a future of more American-made energy.

The ramifications of our continued dependence on foreign oil are many and do not concern just the budgets of American families. The current inaction on the comprehensive energy bill put forth by House Republicans that includes new oil and natural gas exploration, alternative fuels, new refinery construction and conservation incentives, places this nation in a precarious position where we are subject to the unpredictable whims and wishes of foreign nations. Such consequences are, unfortunately, much larger than our own wallets.